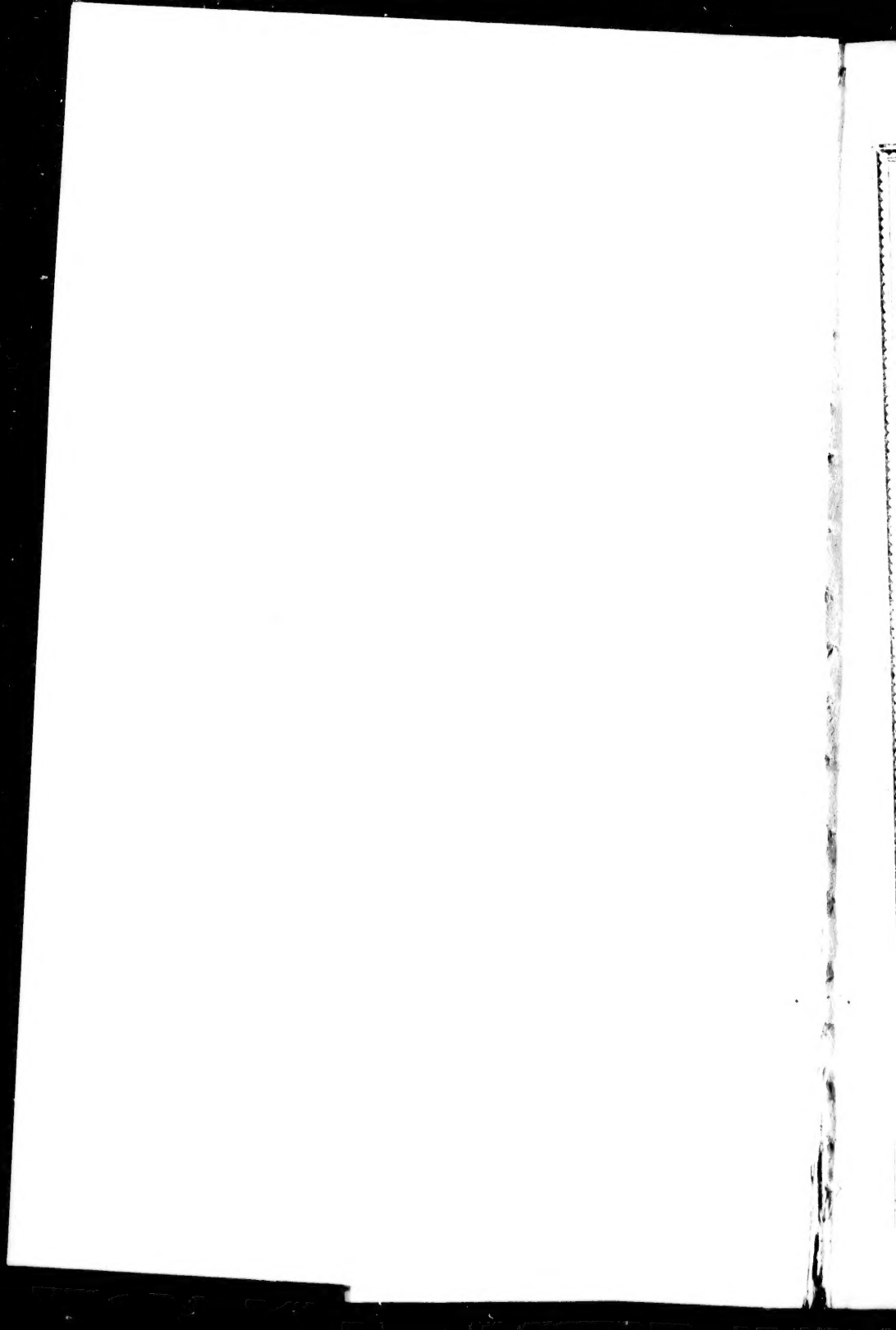




RIGHTEOUSNESS EXALTETH A NATION.

DISCOURSE

CONCERNING THE RELATION OF MORALITY
TO NATIONAL WELLBEING:

PREACHED

IN THE CHURCH OF THE MESSIAH, MONTREAL,

ON SUNDAY EVENING, JANUARY 1, 1860.

BY REV. JOHN CORDNER.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE CONGREGATION.

MONTREAL:

HENRY ROSE, 57 ST. FRANÇOIS XAVIER STREET.

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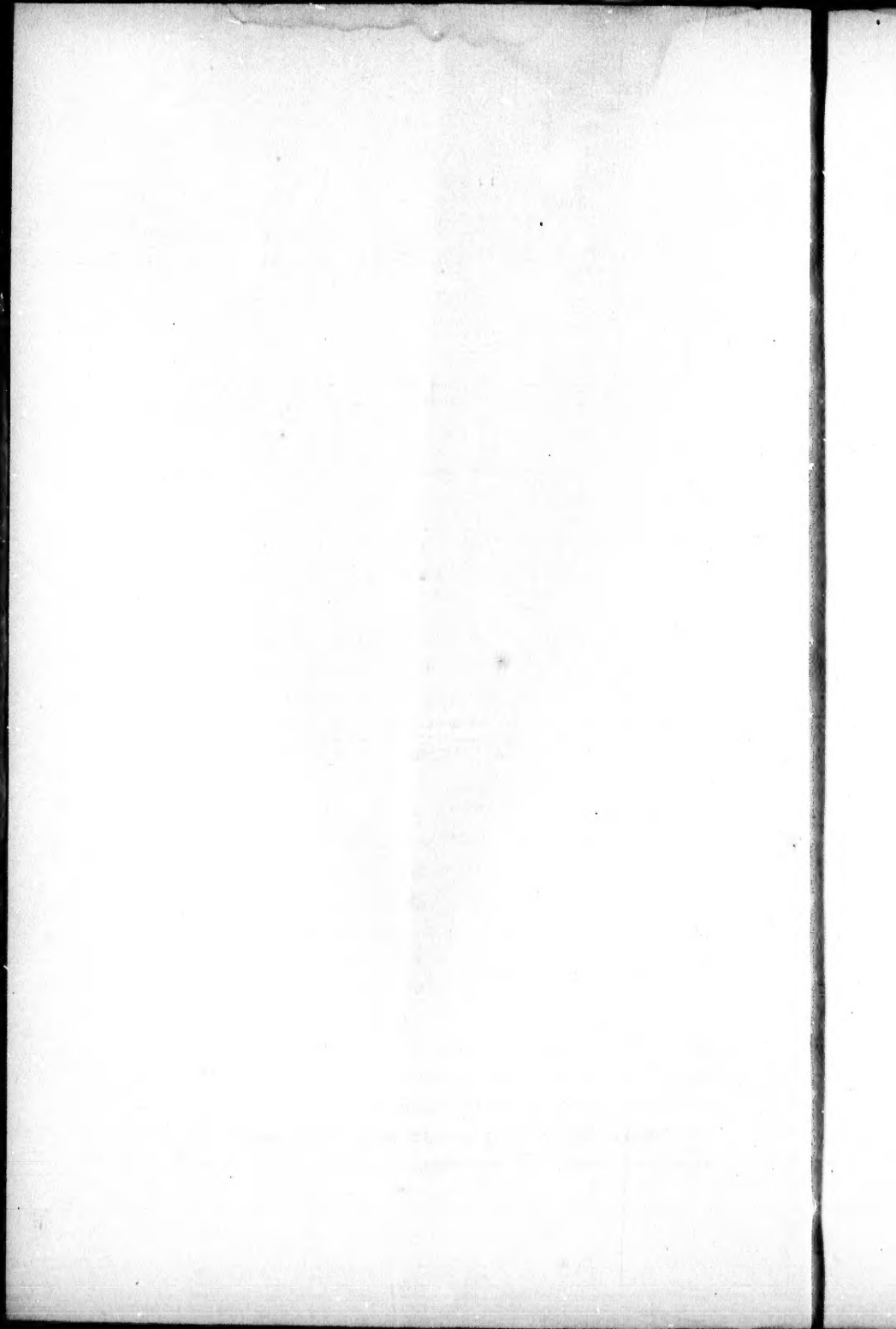
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"RIGHTEOUSNESS EXALTETH A NATION; BUT SIN IS A
REPROACH TO ANY PEOPLE." PROV. XIV.—34.

HERE, my friends, is a terse and familiar sentence taken from the old Hebrew proverbs, and every syllable it contains is freighted with meaning. Christianity in its whole spirit and scope crowns it with its sanction, and affirms it with a commanding emphasis. The advent of the Gospel was at once a signal for the downfall of the ceremonial law of the Hebrews, which was transient in its institution, and a fresh testimony from on high to the value of the moral law, which is eternal as God himself. The Lord Christ in his coming gave to this law a deeper significance, and charged it with a spiritual power which penetrated all the ramifications of man's thought and life. Forms and formalism, rites and ritualism, were all to bow down before the august majesty of its presence and confess themselves useless if they could not help its cause, and worse than useless if, by any attractions which they might offer, or confusion of thought which they might create, they should seduce men away in another direction, and tempt them to divide their allegi-

ance. It was not merely the overt act of murder or lust which the blessed Lord condemned in his sermon on the mount, but the angry thought and the impure affection, out of which such overt acts sprung. No jot nor tittle of this supreme law of righteousness was to be annulled by Christ. In him and through him it was to gain its proper fulfilment. In him and through him the heart and conscience—the moral nature of man—was brought face to face with this law. In its presence man was to live. None of the common resorts of insincerity were to be recognised or tolerated. This was the clear teaching of our Divine Master on this point: "I say unto you, except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees, ye shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Lord's injunction upon us still is, to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Here he indicates what should be the first and leading aim of all our seeking and striving. A single eye to God, and a loving obedience to his law; this is the Christian idea of life. The religion of Jesus covers the whole of life in all its departments, not merely fragmentary parts as special hours, days, or seasons. Not only in the church and private chamber should we look to God, as I said this morning, but also in the warehouse, workshop, and wherever we are. The Lord would have us to feel that the whole of life is religious, and that in all we do or think of doing, we should look to God and to the sanctions of his law. Already, to-day, have I reminded you of this, for as year after year comes to us, and each new year's day at its coming finds us still entangled in the cares and toils of earthly life, it seemed to me fit that

we should remember it, to the end that we might make each new year's day the starting point for a higher goal of Christian living. My first word of preaching to you on this first day of the year was, "seek first God and his righteousness." As Christian men and women, we ought to have a leading life-purpose, and this should be "God and his righteousness," subordinating thereto all other aims and pursuits. Now it must be observed and remembered that the same sincere respect for God and his law, and the same supreme love and loyalty thereto which builds up the proper life of the individual are also required to build up the proper life of a nation. That which lifts us to heavenly citizenship ought to be the leading guidance in earthly citizenship. "By righteousness is a nation exalted," saith the Hebrew proverb. "The nation that will not serve God shall perish," writes God's prophet. These are emphatic declarations of holy writ. Let me now invite you, then, to some reflections on our duty in this regard, and consider our obligation, as members of the general body politic, to affirm and maintain the paramount necessity of righteousness to our national well-being. While the first evening shadows of the new year are gathering round us, let us, from a Christian point of view, consider our obligation as citizens to affirm and maintain the indefeasible claims of truth and justice in all that relates to the administration of our public affairs. Undoubtedly a nation is growing up here in Canada, which promises to hold no mean place in the future annals of civilization. But without pausing to speculate on the future, we may plainly see that Providence has bound up our lot with that of a young nation which is gradually coming to a consciousness of its im-

portance through an increasing population, an increasing development of resources, and an increasing general activity of its people.

In the divine order of events, God has consigned to us of this generation the present direction of the destinies of this young and growing country. Herein we have a great charge—a high responsibility. In the ordering of Providence we stand in our lot here to build up a new nation in this northern latitude. Look at our situation on the map, and notice the influences which bear us company in carrying on the work of civilization on this North American Continent. From the Gulf of Mexico to Hudson's Bay, stretching over some twenty-five degrees of latitude, we find organized institutions of government, on a basis more or less popular, and carried on mainly by men of the Anglo-Saxon and cognate races, speaking the English tongue. From the original settlements on the Atlantic coast, industrial enterprise has pressed far westward, and leaping over a thousand miles of wilderness, has already built some cities on the shore of the Pacific. We may divide this reach of country between the Mexican Gulf and Hudson's Bay into three parts, which we may call southern, central, and northern, and find in each of these parts special characteristics of governmental policy. In the southern portion, which comprises the Slave States of the American Union, we see a prominent vein of barbarism running through the structure of society, and recognised and upheld by law. Truths, with respect to the inalienable rights of men, which the more advanced civilization of this continent holds to be self-evident, are there denied. By the power of usage and law and the national arms, one-third of the

population are held in bondage—robbed of the right of their own bone, sinew and muscle. This element of barbarism blocks the way of progress, and so we find the common instrumentalities and evidences of national advancement—commercial enterprise, industrial development, and general education—all in a backward or stagnant state. In the central portion, which comprises the Free States of the American Union, we see another order of society, far more active, more prosperous, and more hopeful—an order of society which acknowledges the rights of all men to life and liberty. And, building on this foundation of the inalienable rights of man, these Free States have had a national development which, for its rapidity, is without any parallel in history. But through their federal connection with the Slave States, the free basis of their government is tainted and invaded, so that they cannot say of every man within their limits, that his natural and inalienable rights will be recognised, and by them maintained. Within their limits one man may be claimed by another man as his chattel property, and they cannot say nay, nor put in any bar to the unrighteous claim. It cannot be said, then, that in their territory the sacred law of human freedom has sole and undivided rule. And notwithstanding their wonderful development in industry, commerce, and the practical arts, and their widely spread and well endowed institutions for diffusing general education, this slight toward one of the sacred and inalienable rights of man, must stand as a serious slur on the fair face of their advanced and flourishing civilization. In the northern portion, which comprises the combined Provinces of Canada, we see yet another order of society. Nominally dependent

on that great trans-atlantic nation, which is the parent and prototype of the existing civilization of America, we, the people of Canada, are really, and in the main, left to manage our own affairs. Our governmental institutions rest on a popular basis. Our industrial, commercial, and general activity is annually increasing, and though not yet equal to some of the States of the neighboring Union, it bids fair to rival the best of them. Our soil, like that of our mother country, is strictly free, and our laws guarantee to every man within our limits, his natural right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Thus occupying the northernmost portion of civilized America, we have for our base, geographically speaking, the Free States of the American republic, while above us on the map, and stretching away to the Arctic Ocean, there is an immense unoccupied territory, covered with the same flag which covers us, and waiting to be planted and civilized. On the eastward the Gulf of St. Lawrence gathers the briny waters of the Atlantic to lave our shores, while on the westward we have the great fresh water lakes. Coming from the far north-west, we have the grand stream of the Ottawa pressing its waters towards our own goodly city here, where they are received and swallowed up in the magnificent water course of the St. Lawrence, which from the farther south-west carries the contents of our Mediterranean Seas to the broad bosom of the Atlantic. Such is the country in which our lot has been cast by the gracious Providence which casts the lot of men, and sets them in their respective places on the earth to carry out the high purposes of God. All the movements which stir the minds of this continent, chronicled as they are by the daily press, and in a

language common to us all, must affect us more or less. By no method can we, nor ought we, cut ourselves off from general American influences. Our nationality as it grows, must savour of the soil on which it grows. Our civilization as it advances, must have a proper affinity for the continent on which it is built up. By every practicable method, however, ought we to stand clear of what would morally injure and debase us from whatever quarter it may come. From the physical character of our country, may we see that ample scope is given us for development in agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing industry. Our natural resources are extensive; and the increasing facilities for making them available will naturally stimulate the energy and enterprise of our people.

A fair field is given us, then, for a promising career in material prosperity. Shall we rest our national character and risk our national permanence on this? Marked monuments of material progress are rising in various parts of our country. During the month just past, the greatest bridge ever built on this planet has been completed at our own doors. Spanning the St. Lawrence, it stretches from bank to bank over the broad stream on those solid piers which defy alike the weighty rush of the flood, and the far weightier rush of the heaving ice-field. Lying there in the morning or evening sun, it reminds the beholder, who has looked on both, of that wondrous aqueduct structure which, surviving the storms and shocks of eighteen centuries, still stretches away over the wide field of the Roman Campagna. That colossal fragment of the old Roman aqueduct remains, but what has become of the old Roman State and its civilization? After the

lapse of eighteen centuries, shall some curious traveller from afar, come to look on this bridge and find it serving its purpose in the midst of advanced Christian civilization, wherein righteousness is respected, or shall he find it a ruin, having done its work the while for a nation so greedy of gain, and so heedless of truth and right, that the rot of ungodliness penetrated its bones and ate out its vitals?

Placed here by Providence to build up a nation, what sort of builders shall we be? Shall we ignore God and live only for self, or to serve some present purpose of seeming interest or convenience? If so, we write shame on our front, and plant the seeds of disease and decay in our body politic. At the foundation of any hopeful form of civil society, there must be well conceived ideas of justice and right, an honest recognition of God, and a sincere respect for his law. All reliable thinkers affirm this, for they can affirm nothing else. The greatest of the ancient Roman orators is quoted in popular books of our time, as asserting that "eternal justice is the basis of all human laws." And one of the most famous of modern British statesmen proclaims that "justice is the great standing policy of civil society." But all such utterances of orators and statesmen, whether of ancient or modern times, are but repetitions and re-affirmations of what was a proverb in Israel a thousand years before Cicero spoke, and full seven-and-twenty centuries before Edmund Burke was born. By righteousness, saith the proverb, is a nation exalted.

In every hopeful structure of civil society, well conceived ideas of truth and right must lie as fundamental. The only permanent foundation of a nation's welfare

must be found in the upright and high resolved moral character of its people—in the fixed consciousness that both as individuals and as a body politic, they always stand in the very presence of God. It becomes a leading point in statesmanship, therefore, to infuse such a character into the nation—by every available means to elevate the general morality of the people, and to protect its interests by discountenancing and withstanding everything which may directly corrupt and degrade the body politic, or indirectly tend to lower the general respect for truth and justice. According to the theory and usage prevalent here, the ruling power of the governing body cannot be regarded as a power distinct from society, or independent of the general body of the people governed. From this general body the governing body derives its influence. The people of Canada designate and elect the men who manage our national affairs, and delegate to them the power and authority so to do. This being the case, we all become, in a measure, responsible for what they do or leave undone. Clearly, then, as Christian citizens we cannot—dare not—close our eyes to the deeds of our rulers. Their honor is our honor. Their shame our shame. Their loyal allegiance to truth, to justice, and to God will redound to our highest welfare as a nation. Their disregard of morality and disrespect toward God will damage our national prospects and degrade us before heaven and earth.

The people of Canada elect their own law makers. We send delegates to the legislative halls, and their laws become our laws. They are there by our will. They enact by our authority. Herein we have the essence of free and popular government—a boon most precious—a blessing

highly to be prized. Dishonest influence introduced here is treason to the whole system. Corruption in elections defrauds the citizen of his right and imposes upon him a galling wrong and insult. Instead of a representative, it basely obtrudes a voice which will misrepresent him. Every honorable mind shrinks from contact with such baseness, and such treason to civil rights and social order. Now it has become too patent to be denied, that in Canada the honesty and purity of elections are invaded. Fraud, violence and corruption have been resorted to in some places to augment the polls, and men have sat and spoken and voted in parliament, who had neither moral nor legal right to be there. This is a fact which every good citizen must deplore, and against which every honest mind must protest. It is a fact which proclaims disregard of all law, human and divine. It shows too clearly a disordered civil condition, and a debased state of public sentiment, which demands instant attention from every citizen who has at heart the proper welfare of this land. For verily if we go on from year to year, heedlessly to "plow iniquity and sow wickedness, we shall reap the same."

With our institutions of popular and responsible government, the ruling body for the time being—the executive government—may be fairly taken to represent the average morality of the country. Perhaps some of you will say that those who occupy the places of power and influence ought to be men above the average morality—that they ought to shine as lights and be as leaders for the helping of the nation upward to higher planes of righteousness. The sanguine theorist looking at the rose-colored side of our nineteenth century civilization

would probably say that they must be so. The simple, well-intentioned citizen who does not look too closely at actual facts would probably content himself with saying that he hoped they were so. The more thoughtful observer, however, will most likely confine himself to the statement just made: that with us the ruling body, chosen by the people, may be fairly taken to represent the average morality of the people.

Let the people of Canada, then, look at the character of their own morality as it may be seen reflected in the deeds of the men whom they have chosen to carry on the government of the country. We remember what our rulers did on their assumption of power some months more than a year ago. I allude more particularly to what was actually done by a certain number of them, with the tacit sanction of their colleagues—all representing the sentiment and morality of the people of Canada. One assumed one office and another took another, a third assumed still another office and a fourth yet another. On a given day, in all due form, the Governor General administering the oath, each in his turn swore on the holy Evangelists—thus, in the most solemn and emphatic manner which law or custom provides, invoking Almighty God as a witness to his veracity—that he should duly and faithfully perform the functions of the office which he then undertook. But the next morning these functions were abandoned, and those of other offices assumed. Now as to the morality of this procedure we must regard the intention of those who took the oath. If they affirm that they took it in good faith, honestly proposing to discharge the duties sworn to, then the Christian moralist has no word of criticism to offer. But if they put in no

such plea, but openly allege that all this oath-taking was a mere form without any proper intention of fulfilment—a mere form designed to satisfy the letter of a statute and serve a party purpose of the hour—if, by their own allegation, they do in fact acknowledge that all this solemn oath-taking for the due and faithful discharge of certain public functions, was only a necessary formal step towards disclaiming such functions—a requisite technical proceeding towards renouncing them—then the moralist is imperatively bound to take issue with them. He cannot stand mutely by while those who occupy the chief seats of authority and influence in the country do by their example debauch the consciences of the people by weakening their reverence for the sanctity of an oath. He must remind them and all who sanction their doings in this matter, whether on the highest seat of the country or in the obscurest corner thereof, that the Almighty God does not exist for any such purpose as this which they would put him to. He does not occupy his high place in the universe to the end that embarrassed party politicians may make a state-chamber convenience of him. He does not exist, I say, to serve any such purpose as this. Such persons may ring their official bell and summon any official lackey as a formal witness to their formal proceedings, but they are not at liberty thus to summon the Supreme God. He is not their lackey, but their Lord—the Lord of Lords, as he is King of Kings—the Sovereign above all Sovereigns, whose law is above all laws. We have read of an ancient nation who, to meet an exigency, suspended their laws for a day. But the moral laws of the universe admit of no such suspension. By no power of provincial governors, or crown ministers, or party

politicians can the everlasting law of truth and right be suspended for a moment. It obligation is strictly perpetual. No casuistry can annul it. All the clouds which official casuistry may raise to conceal official delinquency speedily disappear before the open daylight breeze of honest common sense. In the estimate of the Christian moralist what does such insincere oath-taking amount to? John Milton, in his treatise on Christian doctrine, defines perjury in two forms, one of which "consists in making a lawful promise under the sanction of an oath, without intending to perform it, or at least without actually performing it." "Ye shall not swear by my name falsely," saith Jehovah, "neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God." No nation can hopefully prosper, or find the blessing of God, or rejoice in the glory of God through such swearing as this. The divine promise to the nations points in the direction quite opposite. The sanctity of truth must receive no slight either in simple word or under form of oath. Truth, on her radiant throne, must always be kept in view as a beacon light, and held in high reverence, for she is of the very essence of God. Thus writes the prophet, "Thou shalt swear the Lord liveth, in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness; and the nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory."

I have said that the people of Canada are responsible for their rulers, and that, in view of our popular institutions, those rulers may at all times be fairly taken to represent the average morality of the country. When abroad, during the past year, on the other side of the Atlantic, I heard this plea urged and I could not reasonably deny its validity. Intelligent persons abroad only

notice our leading political inconsistencies and glaring sins, which stand as our national reproach. They cannot see nor understand the intricate net-work of party purposes through which these things have been brought to pass. They look directly at the results and judge accordingly. Morally considered, the insincere oath-taking cannot be regarded otherwise than as a very grave affront to the majesty and sanctity of truth. And though apparently sanctioned by the majority of this country, through the party votes of their representatives in parliament, I cannot but think, that if the people at large had an opportunity of expressing themselves directly concerning this standing national scandal, by far the greater number would repudiate it, and protest against it before the world.

In a young and growing state of society like ours, we are exposed to many and peculiar perils. Even in well matured nations the combination of qualities requisite to proper statesmanship is only to be found in a highly gifted few. In the absence of statesmen in the proper sense of the term—in the absence of men who, by genius, study, and patient attainment, are qualified to direct the affairs and shape the destinies of the country, we are too often left at the mercy of mere party politicians—men actuated by petty ambition and narrow personal ends. The statesman keeps his eye on the welfare, the honor, and the permanent prosperity of the nation, and he spends his energy and shapes his policy in this direction. The party politician keeps his eye in retention of office and emolument, and whatever wit he has, is kept at work in plotting and scheming for this purpose. Instead of large, wise, statesmanlike measures of national import, he is constantly presenting party devices to meet party emergencies. In

the ancient pagan civilization the internal strifes were those of faction against faction for the larger share of power. This is the natural tendency of unenlightened man. The party politician of to-day rises no higher. In our Christian civilization certain general principles are recognized as absolutely essential to social order and the proper honor and prosperity of nations. The honorable statesman works in view of these principles, and in all the conflicts to which he is called he consents to stand on the ground of principle only, disdaining all baser struggles for office, place, or personal emolument.

Neither you nor I, my friends, can create statesmen. They are the gift of God. But the humblest of us can do something towards raising the standard of general morality, and vindicating that law of righteousness by which nations are exalted. I ask you not to which side of party politics you are attached. With that matter I have no proper concern. It may be of little consequence to you or to me what particular persons shall occupy the seats of governor and crown ministers for the time being, but it is of great consequence to us that, whosoever they are, they shall hold God in reverence, and in their public transactions give just respect to his laws of morality. And seeing how various and weighty are the general social interests depending on personal veracity, and especially on the regard given to the sanctity of an oath, it is of high importance that our rulers should recognize this, and by their influence strengthen the authority of such a solemn averment in and over the common mind, and not weaken it. As for political parties, while we may recognize their uses we must confess that on all sides, and under whatever leaders, they too frequently

become snares to personal independence, and shoals whereon private honor is shipwrecked. As for party affinities, again, each one must judge and act for himself. But in all issues as between honesty and dishonesty, sincerity and insincerity, justice and injustice—in all such moral issues which rise clear above party lines we are bound to warn each other, and ought constantly to stand warned, against any compromise with unrighteousness, though the compromise seem ever so small, or ever so convenient for the present. Every such compromise is a sin which a righteous God cannot but hate—a sin which must degrade and be a reproach to the nation.

“Righteousness exalteth a nation; but sin is a reproach to any people.” We may hold conventions, as some of our compatriots have done, or write out constitutions, as some of them still talk of doing, but constitutions, written or unwritten, will be of little avail unless, by elevating the general morality, we can have honest and honorable public men to deal with them. We cannot make a nation out of written parchments be they ever so skilfully drawn, any more than out of railways, bridges, or other monuments of material achievement. Only men can make a nation—high minded Christian men, who love righteousness and are loyal to it, who hate iniquity and abjure it. The great and loving God by whom kings reign, and princes decree, and rulers rule, and peoples rise and fall, is the perfection of justice and truth. And as we gather here in the sanctuary to adore him, our prayer and effort still should be to grow into his likeness through the growing love of his blessed perfections. The life of God flowing through upright and faithful souls will be the life, the strength, and the glory of the nation. And Christian

fathers and mothers, by their daily ministrations in the familiar temple of the household, may, through the devout training of their little ones in that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom, and in that love of God and his righteousness, which is the everlasting joy and hope of the soul—they may contribute directly to the honor, the proper welfare, and the hopeful prosperity of the country. As Christian citizens we have the matter in our own hands. If we are heedless of God, and disloyal to his law of righteousness in our national concerns, we abdicate our functions, and basely misuse as grand an opportunity as ever was given to man for building up a free and prosperous Christian nation. If we are faithful to God and hold in steady reverence his law of truth and right, his smile will be upon us, his blessing will bless us, his hand will help us, and we shall be co-workers with all upright, noble and holy souls in all lands, toward hastening the day when all the nations of this earth shall become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ.

Now unto Him who is able to keep us from falling, the only wise God ; be honor and glory, through Jesus Christ, for ever and ever. Amen.